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Monotheism and Trinity

The problem of God and Man and its implications for life in our society

By Fr. Khalil Samir S.J.

I am somewhat embarrassed, not knowing how to approach this subject. My embarrassment arises from the fact that, in truth, there are two distinct subjects which one would like to connect together: on the one hand the question of God, in Islam and in Christianity (and as a consequence the concepts of absolute monotheism and Trinitarian monotheism); and on the other hand, the question of humanity in Islam and in Christianity.

Because of this, it would be preferable to treat the subject in two stages: first of all, the concept that each religion has of God; then, what effect this concept has on the family, on society, on culture and on politics. What are the implications of this concept of God for life as it is lived.

If I have divided my subject in this way, the division may seem simple but the subject is huge. Effectively from the theological point of view two entirely distinct methods are required.

The question that many people frequently ask me is the following: “Do we adore the same God as Christians and Muslims? Have Christians and Muslims the same God?”

I am always embarrassed by this question. It is evident that there is but one God whom we all call Allah. When as Muslims and Christians we speak of God, by that very fact we are speaking of the same God. On the other hand however, it is certain that our understanding of God, our concept of God is not the same. One can say then that we all adore the same God, however, we understand him differently.

I. Introduction: One God

The three monotheistic faiths Judaism, Christianity and Islam are linked culturally. It is not by chance that the tradition of the Catholic Church groups these three religions under the heading of monotheism and distinguishes them from other beliefs in God. In fact, in these three religions we find a unique God, creator of everything that exists (whether it is a question of good or evil) and a personal God, (that is to say who has a personal relationship with humanity). As far as I know, one does not find these three constituent elements of a monotheistic God (unique, creator/creating and personal) in any other religion. It is because of this that one can

only speak of monotheism with regard to these three religions, and one could say that what you are dealing with is a monotheism in three different forms.

Furthermore, the three religions claim a common bond or a common origin in relation to a certain number of shared personages. In particular, the three religions recognise Abraham as being their father in the faith. Besides this common father (but which they do not recognise as their common existence!), they declare themselves to be related to numerous biblical figures: Adam, Abel, Noah, Moses etc. The last mentioned religions (Christianity and Islam) also recognise Jesus as an outstanding character sent by God.

The tradition common to the three religions is the biblical tradition. For the Jews, this common foundation is the Old Testament only; for Christians and Muslims, this foundation includes the New Testament (at least in theory). For Muslims the Koran is also included.

It is this (inclusiveness) which explains, let it be said in passing, how the Muslims consider themselves as the logical extension and completion of monotheism in the tradition of Abraham. They see their religion as being perfect since it encompasses all that God revealed in the Old Testament and the New Testament and it adds further elements from the Koran which rectify and complement earlier revelations.

This attitude also explains the belief that all Muslims have of not only belonging to the most perfect religion but also to the most tolerant religion which welcomes in the Koran not only the prophets of Judaism and Christianity but even those of Paganism. In reality, whoever studies the text of the Koran with care realises that behind this language or the common vocabulary an enormous difference is revealed as regards the interpretation of these texts, so much so, that behind these shared figures a huge difference is observed not only in the understanding of their role but also in the content of their message.

I have not the time to develop this point. I merely cite one example: the Muslims say of Jesus that he is the “Word of God” (Kalimat Allah); they add also (something which is not in the New Testament) that he is “The Spirit of God” (ruh Allah). They say that he was born of the Mary and the Holy Spirit (ruh al-Qudus) (or literally Holy Spirit, in conformity to the Syriac Tradition) and they recognise that he was not born of a man of a father. However, they in the most definite way do not give to these essential Christian terms the meaning that they have in Christianity. They do this not out of malevolence nor out of a desire to misrepresent Christianity but simply because this is how they have understood these terms.

There is then one can see a very important common foundation, but also one that is ambiguous, because under these common terms we see different realities. In

fact, it is more deceiving to use these common terms with their different understandings than to use different terms.

II. Three Approaches to God

I come back then to the point I was making namely that the three faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam recognise a God who is one, a Creator and a personal God. It is equally true that on the other hand, the concept that each of the three faiths has of God is different.

1. The Jewish understanding of God

a) The understanding in primitive Judaism

For the Jews, it is the Almighty who chose for himself a people to be his messenger his spokesperson for humanity, a people whom he liberates from slavery (an historical fact, recorded in the book of Exodus) and whom he accompanies during its travels to the Promised Land (the forty years in the desert) and all during its history. We are dealing therefore with an historic personal relationship between God and a people, his people. This same God reveals himself through his prophets, that is to say through his messengers whose mission it is to make known the true face of God and to prepare this people to welcome and recognise the promised Messiah, he who would liberate his people (and all people also) in a definitive way.

This idea of the Messiah, which is essential for Christianity which is derived from it, would evolve bit by bit. In early times, the Messiah is conceived as a liberator, in the political sense of that word. Little by little, through the vicissitudes of history, because of defeats and disappointments, because of exile and deportation, the notion of Messiah would undergo an evolution in meaning.

b) The Spiritualisation of this vision at the hands of the later prophets

From a political Messiah, the Messiah who is king and liberator, we pass to a Messiah who has a moral and spiritual mission, because there is no longer a king, the kingdom is destroyed, royalty has been abolished and the people deported. So with the later prophets begins a spiritual vision of the Messiah.

Christianity comes and grafts itself onto this last stage of the Judaic vision. It is the logical progression of what the prophets have announced. It is easy to see that salvation, which is conceived as the fruit of the gift of God, but also the fruit of the practice of the Law in all its details (in this understanding of salvation, it is the literal practice of the Law which saves humanity) which will evolve little by little towards an interiorisation of the Law (we know the beautiful texts of Jeremiah “I

will write my Law in their hearts. I will change their hearts of stone into hearts of flesh’): it is no longer the stone tablets of the law which saves humanity, but the interiorised Law. This will become the vision of the New Testament.

So then, the prophets evolve their vision with the people and move towards a spiritualisation of Judaism, of the Law and of the idea of Messiah, they also evolve towards a spiritualisation of the idea of God who no longer appears like a military chief (the God of the armies, Yahweh Sabaoth) but who is personal and has a personality, a God who speaks to the heart (“I will lead her out to the desert and will speak to her heart to heart”). Yet God keeps certain characteristics of the primitive God, he is omnipotent, vengeful, victorious, he crushes, he does what he wills (“I am merciful to those I choose and I punish those I choose!”) He reveals himself to Israel as a father, or rather a mother, who takes his people on his knee (a biblical expression).

It is easy to see how the prophets, these messengers of God change and make the people change towards a spiritualisation of the fundamental ideas of Judaism. This vision does not contradict the primitive notion but it is quite different.

This explains the broad welcome given to Christ when he appears and his recognition by many as the Messiah they had been expecting. If there had not been a prophetic movement in the previous centuries of Judaism, Christ would not have been recognised as the longed for Messiah. On the other hand, this spiritual evolution in understanding was the result of a personal reading of the Bible by the Jews and the recognition of the Christ, as the Messiah who had been announced and hoped for, would also be a personal acceptance by individuals. When one takes this into account one can understand how the majority of Jews would refuse to recognise Christ as the expected Messiah whilst a minority would recognise him. This is the concept of God that Judaism offers.

c) A God inserted into the history of a people and of the world

But this God is also inserted into the history of a people and through that of the world. I underline this point, because it seems to me capital in the Judeo-Christian vision, whilst it is practically absent from Islam. The fact that biblical revelation is spread over centuries, that Abraham lived 1900 years before Christ and that there is then a continual evolution throughout the Book that is called the Bible, gives to Jews (and as a consequence to Christians) an understanding of revelation which is in perpetual evolution, and not a fixed vision of revelation.

This is absolutely opposed to the Muslim understanding of revelation, where the Arabic word used is *tanzil* which means “descent”. For the Muslims, the Koran actually “descended” on Muhammad, who only had to retransmit it orally, because the original of the Koran (*umm al-Kitab*), according to the Muslims, is written in heaven, whence it descended on Muhammad. The latter had only to retransmit it to

his people, in little sections according to their needs. The text of the Koran is presented then as a solid block which does not allow any change or evolution. This idea one suspects has considerable consequences for the daily life of Muslims, preventing them from interpreting the sacred text according to the knowledge and needs of the present time.

2. The Christian understanding of God

a) Christianity is an interiorising continuation of the Old Testament

For Christians everything that has been said of Judaism remains, without doubt true. There can be no question of eliminating any element whatsoever of the biblical tradition of the Old Testament. I say that because we find often in the history of the Church, sects who try to eliminate some elements of the Old Testament, indeed some who reject it totally. Even in the Lebanon this tendency is very obvious amongst those in the Syrian Socialist Party (PSS) who simply reject the Old Testament considering it absolutely barbaric.

Having accepted that nothing in the Old Testament can be rejected (and this is an indisputable truth of faith), Christianity is presented then as an interiorising continuation of the Old Testament. In other terms, it is true that God is the all-powerful one and even the avenging God, who does what He wishes when He wishes. But, the emphasis is not on these ideas; the emphasis is on the idea of God as Father; so much so that the only Aramaic word retained in the New Testament to designate God is the word "Abba" which the apostles and the disciples (and Paul mystically) heard from the mouth of Christ himself. The apostles recorded this word just as it was spoken, adding the Greek translation, probably because they had been astonished by it; they had heard Christ addressing God by calling him "abba" father. What intimacy is signified by this name!

b) The God of Jesus Christ is revealed as God the Father, the God of love

The God of Jesus-Christ is revealed then as God the father, the God of love. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son" (John 3:16). St. John will even give this definition of God, "God is love" (1 John). God is revealed then to us as the God does everything through love, who creates the world through love, who becomes incarnate through love, who give himself to us on the cross through love. And this love continues every day, in what we call Divine Providence, which accompanies us throughout life. The essential characteristic is that this God has done everything through love, from the creation of the world until the present moment, because he is Love. This point for me is primary.

c) Henceforth, God does not reveal himself to the world through the prophets but, through his only Son.

Henceforth, God does not reveal himself to the world through the prophets, since the mission of the prophets was to make known the true face of God to the world and also to prepare the world to recognise the Messiah. Now the Messiah is here and the Kingdom is already amongst us.

The only prophet of the New Testament, according to Christ himself, is John the Baptist. For Christians he is the last and the crowning of the prophets. After him there can be no more prophets. In effect, John the Baptist not only announces the Christ like all the prophets of the Old Testament, but he also points him out with his finger “Here is the Lamb of God!” a gesture of which the Roman liturgy will remind us at every Eucharist: “Behold the Lamb of God”. From now on, the era of the prophets is over, and that is what the two disciples of John the Baptist understand when they abandon him to follow Christ, with the blessing of John.

The last of the prophets was John the Baptist, God will no longer reveal himself to the world by his prophets, but by his only Son, who is his actual Word, who is the promised and hoped for Messiah. John the Baptist is the last of the prophets, who points out the Messiah and announces that the Kingdom of God is from now on present.

d) Christ is the actual Word of God, his good news.

Christ does not present himself as a prophet, it is the Jews who sometimes give him this name. He recognises himself on the contrary as the Messiah. He is not the spokesperson of God (as prophets are) but the actual Word of God. John the Evangelist understands this well when he dares to use this term to designate God. It is without doubt the first time in the history of humanity that someone uses the term “Word of God” to personify someone. The Word has become flesh, a person and a man.

Christ himself is then the actual revelation of God, and not the transmitter of his word. He is the message and the messenger. It is this which explains how the Gospels which are the “Good News” of God, the *Bushra*, are centred on Christ since He is this Good News.

There is here a fundamental difference with Islam, which does not at all understand the Gospels. Indeed, the traditional Muslim, if he happens to read the Gospel, has a double reaction: on the one hand he appreciates its teaching notably the teaching sections where Christ speaks of God and the Kingdom; on the other hand and at the same time, he considers that this could not be the actual word of God sent down to Jesus.

In effect, our Gospels appear a little like a biography of Christ: and that corresponds for him to the *Sirah Nabawiyyah*, to the biography of Muhammad of which several editions exist from the second to the eighth centuries. Now these biographies are not evidently inspired by God. This is why the Muslims are shocked when we tell them that our Gospels are the revealed word of God. It is one of the reasons which makes them say that we have falsified or distorted our scriptures (*tahrif al-Ingil*), because a revelation should contain only the words pronounced by God.

But precisely, if the Gospel is presented in this way, as a biography of Christ integrating his deed his gestures and words, it is because the content of the revelation is none other than the person of Christ. In speaking of Christ, I say who is God, I describe him. The very fact that our Gospels are a sort of life of Christ, confirms what the Apostles understood and knew from the beginning that this man Jesus Christ is none other than God revealed in the flesh.

Such is the Christian vision of God. Henceforth, in order to know God, I have to look at Christ, to know Christ is to know “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians).

3. The Muslim concept of God

a) Reworking of the Jewish concept of God adapted to the Arabic context.

The Muslim concept of God is in reality quite close to the Jewish concept. This is explained, I believe, in two ways. First of all culturally, by the fact that the situation of nascent Judaism, with its Bedouin Patriarchs and its twelve tribes, is very close to the cultural milieu of Arabia. Secondly, in the historical sense, by the fact that the Jewish influence was much more in evidence in the life of Muhammad than that of Christianity. Indeed, the Jews were strongly represented at Medina, the prophet's town, where Muhammad lived for the last ten years of his life from 622 until 632. It is true that he fought against the Jews at Medina in 624, forcing them to convert or to leave the town, it is however none the less true that the message of the Koran and Muslim practices are strongly marked by the influence of Judaism.

Islam then reworks the concept of God which the Jews had, but rethinks it into the cultural context of the Arabic Peninsula. God appears in this concept as an absolute monarch, or rather like the chief of a tribe possessing all power, who is a law unto himself and who decides on his own what is to be done and his decision is indisputable and irrevocable. Just as the chief of a tribe defends his tribe by attacking others if necessary, so God is the God of vengeance and always victorious.

But he is also the one who pardons whomsoever he wills, when he wills; he is merciful to whomsoever he wills because he does not have to render an account

to anybody. He is the all-powerful who inclines towards his subjects (literally those who “submit”). Briefly, he holds the power of the prince who has the right to condemn or to pardon. It is because he is omnipotent (*al-Quadir, al-Gabbar*) that he is also merciful (*al-Rahman, al-Rahim*).

b) The difference between the Merciful One and Father, the weak influence of Christianity.

The notion of the Merciful One is, however, very far from that of Father and still further from that of Mother. I realise this fact with my students of Islamic theology, particularly with those of them who are going to be *imams*: when I introduce Christianity and when I tell them that God is normally called “the Father” and that we always use this title in our habitual prayer, the very one taught to us by Christ (the Our Father), they are shocked. This idea affronts them.

It is seen at this juncture that Christianity had very little of what we might call profound influence on the nascent Islamic faith. It is true that at Mecca Muhammad’s town, there were Christians: whether these were Ethiopians who were so to speak the military guardians of the town, or individuals who had become Christian, we do not know. But, Islamic tradition has it that a cousin of Khadigah (the wife of Muhammad), who was called Waraqah Ibn Nawfal, was a Christian (the Muslims say that he was a bishop, but we are not sure of this fact, because there was no bishop at Mecca). According to this tradition, he was the one who officiated at the marriage of Muhammad and Khadigah, a marriage which remained monogamous and indissoluble until the death of Khadigah (it is an astonishing fact, that Muhammad took no other concubine nor married any other woman during all of this period, and this could be a confirmation of the belief that the marriage had been sealed by Waraqah the Christian). Despite all this, the influence of Christianity on both Islamic law and the Islamic concept of God, seems to be rather weak.

c) God was revealed to Adam to whom he taught Islam the only true religion.

It was God who made Himself known from the beginning to Adam and who taught him total submission to the divine will which is the root meaning of Islam. Islam is the religion which God put into the heart of man in Adam. So much so, that Adam (according to the Koran) was a Muslim, that is, someone who had submitted to God. In the same way, according to the Koran, Abraham and all the prophets were Muslims, as were the Apostles. Jesus was also a Muslim, and when he reappears on Judgement Day he will publicly declare his Islamic faith.

I mention her between brackets, a beautiful Koranic formula: *imma d-din ‘inda Allah al-Islam*, which the Muslims generally translate as “the true religion is Islam”. In an article which I published in honour of Father Maurice Borrmans, I explained this formula in accordance with its etymology which should be rendered “the true religious attitude consists in submitting oneself to God”. Here you see the

enormous difference between two interpretations: the first which is not the original meaning in the Koran, involves the taking of a narrow view in relation to all other religions; whilst the second which does correspond to the original meaning in the Koran, expresses the fundamental attitude of the believer indeed of every believer.

I have explained then that, according to this formula in the Koran, Jesus is the true Muslim, indeed he is the greatest Muslim, because he is the only one who delivers himself totally to God, his Father, who is totally and voluntarily submissive to God, going as far as giving his life, handing over his Spirit, which he had received from God, (using the expression of St. John) on the cross.

This is the Muslim concept of God, and it gives us an idea at the same time of the relationship between humanity and God. In Islam it is the total submission to God which achieves salvation. This submission implies the application of the Divine Law in its tiniest details, the same as in Judaism. This submission is innate in humanity, in Adam. It is why every normal human being is by nature a Muslim. A famous *Hadit* (that is a saying attributed to Muhammad) says “Every human being is born a Muslim, and it is only parents who make him/her a Jew, a Zoroastrian or a Christian.

Another *hadit*, no less famous, goes “*al-islam din al-fitrah*”. The Islamic translation is “Islam is the natural religion, that is to say the religion of the human being as (s)he has been created by God, in the state of nature. The translation which is faithful to the etymology is “The submission to God is the natural attitude”. Here again you see how the interpretation of the word *Islam* and also that of *din* modifies the meaning of the phrase.

In short, for the Muslims, God is the All-Powerful One, the Conqueror, He who expects and receives from humanity adoration and total submission; but He is also the Merciful-One, who pardons whomsoever he wills and as he wills. He made himself known to Adam revealing to him total submission which is Islam and after him to a crowd of prophets known and unknown, notably Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Finally, he revealed himself to Muhammad, who is the “crowning of the prophets” and who brings the perfect form of religion and revelation.

God presents himself as the all-powerful king and absolute monarch.

III. The Trinity

1. Introduction: The Koranic presentation of the Trinity

“De Deo uno et trino”, as we used to say in the past. The Koran (and the Muslims as a result) reproach us for believing in the Trinity. In several places the

Koran repeats this admonition to Christians: “Do not say three, stop, it would be better for you”. It is a threat.

In one case, the Koran specifies the members of this Trinity. They are God, Mary, and Jesus.: "O Jesus, did you say to your disciples: Adore me, me and my mother, next to God? Here is the possible explication of the error. Since Jesus is for Christians the Son of God (which the Koran reproaches them in this passage) and Mary is the mother of Jesus, we can deduce that God and Mary engendered Jesus.

This is understood in the cultural context of Arabia, in which the gods and goddesses come together to produce sons. The goddess is then called a concubine (*sahibah*) in the Koran. We find an allusion to this same mythology in the Bible (in Genesis 6:1-4), where we see the sons of the Gods coming down to earth to mate with the daughters of humankind who were so beautiful so that they might produce giants, the Amalekites (*al-'Amaliqah*). It is against these pagan concepts, in which the Trinity is likened to pagan Arabic myths, that the Koran is reacting. The Trinity is perceived as being a form, somewhat sublime of polytheism, and because of this it is rejected by the Koran.

You can ask yourself why the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in this Koranic Trinity whilst the Holy Spirit (*Ruh al Qudus*) is mentioned three times in the Koran . The reason is that the Spirit in the Koran signifies angel or the Angel Gabriel. Therefore in the Koranic narrative of the Annunciation (Coran 3 and 19), a narrative which has great stylistic beauty, it is the Spirit of God who comes to Mary and who dialogues with her. The Spirit is not a disembodied being but an angel, a man of imposing appearance (*insanan sawiyyan*) , as is the case elsewhere in the bible. It is for this reason that in the one and only mention of the Trinity in the Koran, the Spirit makes no appearance.

2. The Trinity as presented to the Muslims

In these conditions how is it possible to get the Muslims to understand that the Trinity is not opposed to Monotheism but in fact is the crowning glory of the concept.

a) Presenting the Christian vision of existence starting with the concept of God as Father and as Love.

My personal theological reflection worked out from the starting point of the Muslim context has led me to find the key to the problem in the words of St. John “God is Love”, words which join the theme of God and Father. The task which is demanded of us is to try to present all of Christian faith and the sacraments, as well as Christian morality, Christian practice and the Christian life, in a word the whole

Christian vision of existence from the unique starting point of God as Father and Love. I would like to explain here the reason for this approach.

The Muslims reproach Christians for having a religion which is too complicated in its dogmas and its general beliefs. Whilst the Muslim when asked what is Islam, can reply by a profession of faith (the *sahadah*) which is contained in a little phrase.

I call to mind an experiment made in Cairo around 1977 in setting of an Islamic-Christian group Al-lha' al-dini: we used meet every month, bishops, priests and Christian laity on one side and imams and lay Muslims on the other, each one explaining to the other his faith. On the occasion of which I speak it was Father Sakis, a Greek Catholic priest from Heliopolis, who was presenting the Christian faith to the Muslims. He was a good theologian who made an accurate summary of Christian dogmas and practice. He presented the principal "mysteries" of the faith (Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption), then the seven sacraments. Now mystery and sacrament are translated in Arabic as '*sirr*' (plural *asrar*) and in Greek *mysterion* (plural *mysteria*) means "mystery" or "secret".

When he had finished his exposition, an imam seated beside me stood up and said: "If I understand correctly, your religion is composed entirely of mysteries (*asrar*) which cannot be understood."

I would have liked to have replied to him that in reality a mystery is not something that cannot be understood, but something, which because of its complexity and its depth one will never fully understand. The more I understand something, the more I discover there is to understand about it. It is like God: the more I advance in the knowledge of God, the more I discover that I have understood nothing about God. God reveals himself as being like a bottomless well an inexhaustible wellspring. In this sense our religion is truly a religion of mysteries because it is an inexhaustible source of life and knowledge.

b) Christianity is a complicated, irrational and idealistic religion

It's nonetheless true that the Muslims reproach us for having a complicated, irrational and idealistic religion.

Complicated because the Christian Credo is much more developed than the Muslim Credo. For the Muslim, it suffices to say "There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet", and he is then officially a Muslim. The Christian has first of all to recite the Nicene Credo . Paul VI has even completed this Credo by adding his own elaborated text. The popes indeed like from time to time to add some new dogma.

Irrational, because we say that God is one and God is three, that Christ is God and man, etc. Whilst Islam is a rational and simple religion (they say), Christianity is full of mysteries, recondite and incomprehensible truths.

Idealistic, because Christianity proposes a morality which is very beautiful and very noble, but totally inaccessible, and everyone knows that no-one lives this ideal. "So, they say to us, you reproach Islam for being an easy religion, you reproach us for tolerating polygamy etc. Go and see then what the Western Christians do and how they live: each one has a mistress or a lover outside marriage! Isn't it better to have official polygamy!" Such is the image that Christianity has amongst Muslims.

3. A reflection starting with mediaeval Arabic Christian theology

So then, the question which every Arabic Christian has to ask of himself or herself is: "How can I present my Christian faith (like the *sahadah* of the Muslims) in a simple, clear, rational and realistic way?"

For twenty years, I have been trying to work out a Christian theogony in the Muslim context. The key to it has been given to me by Arab theologians of the ninth to the thirteenth centuries notably: Abu Ra'itah Habib Ibn Hudayfah al-Takriti (a Syrian from Irak, who wrote around 820), the great philosopher Abu Zakariyya Yahya Ibn'Adi (a Syrian from Irak, who wrote around 940), the bishop Bulus al-busi and the theologian Abu al-Fad'il Safiyy al-Dawlah Ibn ai-Assal (both of whom were Copts from Cairo who wrote around 1240). These four authors present the various facets of the Christian faith with one starting point, God is love (Allah is the *Gawwad*, the Good or the Very Generous One, terms which correspond with the Arab philosophers rendition of the Greek *Agathos*). All the Christian dogmas flow from this unique truth.

This is how one might present all that relying on these diverse authors.

a) Why did God create the world? Out of love

The point of departure which is common to Christians and Muslims is that God is the unique creator of everything that exists. Accepting this, the question is then asked: Why did God create the world? Is it because he needed humanity, because he was lacking something? That is not God's way! That is unthinkable: God is self-sufficient. Did he create without any particular aim like a game (*abatan*), as the Koran says, the expression which one finds amongst ancient Arab Christian thinkers)? That is not God's way! He does nothing without a motive.

Then, why did God create the world and humanity in particular: If it cannot be through need, nor for a joke, nor for no particular reason, it can only be out of

goodness, love, affection mercy, compassion etc. There are several Arab terms used to express the motive for creation: *rahmah*, *rafah*, *hanan*, *tahannun*, *wudd*, *gud*, etc.

This last mentioned word *gud* is the most frequently used. It corresponds both to word *agatheia* of the Greek philosophers and to the word *love* of the Christian thinkers. The terms *hubband* *mahabbah*, which are habitually used today by Christians especially the latter term are hardly ever found in the vocabulary of the Christian mediaeval Arab thinkers. The reason is that these terms are not used by the Muslims to speak of God, even if it is true that you occasionally find in the Koran the verb *ahabba* applied to God, and that the first term, *hubb*, has in current usage a very human meaning, sometimes even sensual (on the other hand, the term *mahabbah* corresponds to the notion of charity, of spiritual love).

So then, if God created the universe and humanity in particular, it could only out of kindness and love. Indeed further, the entire universe having been created for humanity which has been put in charge of it, we have a further sign of the love of God the Creator for us: God has done everything with humanity in mind.

b) God is by nature, Good, Generous and Loving

Having arrived at this conclusion, a new question is posed; This love of the Creator for humanity does it show only at the moment of creation, in the creative act? Is God Loving, Good and Generous (in Arabic *Gawwad*) only when he creates: Could you imagine that God did not have these attributes before creating and had them only at the precise moment when he was creating? That is absurd. Therefore one is obliged to conclude that God is by nature Loving, Good and Generous (*Gawwad*), that his very nature, his deepest meaning, his essence, is to love. He is then in himself Love, independent of humanity and of the creative act.

We discover then progressively that God is Love, *al-Gawwad*, which is precisely the Christian perspective on God. But then, how does God discover his nature, the fact even that he is Love, before creating? Love is by definition sharing and exchanging. But if there is no-one with whom God can share? If there isn't yet a human being, how does God discover the sharing of love? From this question you come naturally to the Trinity: God is Love because he shares his internal gift. He has no need of anything or of anyone to give himself to or to share with. This gift is internal to himself without being an egoist or an egocentric. It is the circulation of love within God, within God himself which we call the Trinity.

So that this sharing should be perfect, three are necessary neither more nor less. Neither less, because a love between two has something of the egoist, like a couple who refuse to procreate, to concretise their love in a third person. Not more than three, because it is not necessary and what is not necessary should be eliminated. The Trinitarian relationship is then the most perfect.

The Christian Arab philosophers, following the lead of Yahya Ibn'Adi (c. 940) adopted the Aristotelian vision of God as being the Intelligence which understands himself and is the object of intellection for himself. God is the Understanding-Intellect which is understood (*Aql*-'*Aqil-Ma'qul*). In effect, God is the greatest intellect; he is also the only one able to understand himself (and because of that he is the Understanding One, *al-'Aqil*; he is finally the sole object of knowledge for himself, he is the Understood One (*al-Maqul*). This formula applied for the first time to the Trinity by Yahya Ibn 'Adi around 940, was taken up by several later Christian Arab thinkers. It reminds one of the Trinitarian presentation of St. Augustine. God who is Love, loves himself and is the object of love for himself. This is their presentation of the Trinity.

IV. Incarnation and Redemption

1. The Incarnation presented to the Muslims

The incarnation is an internal necessity for God

- because if God is in his very essence, love
- and if love consists in self-communication, self giving
- in other terms if God is the Giver par excellence (*al-Gawwad*)
- he must necessarily (by a necessity internal to himself and not external) communicate himself, give himself.

We have seen that it is precisely within the Trinity that God gives and communicates himself. This is what the scholastic theologians called the *processio ad intra*. We have seen that God prolongs this gift by bringing into existence everything that exists, that is to say by creating. This is what is called the *processio ad extra*. But now that the world has been created, God crowns his gift by communicating himself (and not only by communicating life and existence to beings).

How is this understood? The explanation (one could say the 'reasoning') is simple.

- If God is the Giver par excellence (*al-Gawwad*), he must give what is best to the world. In Arabic, this is expressed in a beautiful formula: *Al-Gawwad yagud bi-agwad al-mawgudat*. For if he was not giving what is best to the world, he would no longer be the Giver, the Generous One (*al-Gawwad*). By the very fact that God gives as a gift to the world that which is best, he gives the best of that which exists.
- Now what could be better in the world than God himself?
- Therefore, if God is God, he has to give himself to the world. This is an internal necessity for God, a logical consequence, deriving from his essence which is the Giver par excellence (*Agathos or Gawwad*, to use

the philosophical terminology) it also derives from the fact that he is Love (to use the spiritual terminology).

Further, not only does God give himself to the world, but he gives himself to the noblest of his creatures to humanity. He gives himself to humanity his creation to be one with it. This union of God with humanity which he created is what we call the Incarnation (in Arabic *ta'annus*, that is to say "to become man" or again *taggassud* – "to become flesh" or again *ittiahd* or *ittisal* = union). The union of God with humanity which he created, the Incarnation, is a logical consequence of the essence of God manifested in the Trinity. It is the crowning achievement of the movement of communication *ad extra* begun in creation.

If the objection is made that it is not possible that God would communicate with humanity, one can reply: "Why is that not possible?"

- Is God not able to communicate himself? But then he would not be the All-Powerful One!
- Is it that he could communicate himself but does not want to do it? But then he is an egoist and not the God of love.
- Is it that the union between God and humanity (which is nothing less than the Incarnation) is impossible? But union is not impossible except between two opposites (*mutaddadan*). Now there can be no opposition between God and humanity: especially since according to the bible, God created humanity in his own image and likeness (Genesis 2:18), and the image can only be a reflection of the original. Therefore there can be no opposition between God and humanity.

Thus whatever way things are considered, if God is Love, he must become part of humanity.

2. The Redemption and the Eucharist presented to the Muslims

The same goes for the mystery of the Redemption. For us Christians this is almost too evident, for the text of St. John immediately comes to mind: "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but may have life eternal" (John 3:16).

In the theogony of St. John, everything flows from the fact that God is Love. At the beginning of the Passion Narrative John recalls once again this mystery of love: "Jesus, having loved his own who were in the world, loved them until the end" (John 13:1) Then the narrative of the washing of the feet begins, a concrete sign of love, which in St. John replaces the Eucharistic narrative.

The Eucharist itself is nothing other than the continuation of the Incarnation. That is well explained by Bulus al-Busi, the Coptic theologian consecrated Bishop of Cairo in 1240. He shows how the Incarnation of God is continued in the Eucharist: first of all, God becomes incarnate to raise up humanity from its fall: secondly this same God incarnate makes himself bread so as to be the daily nourishment of humanity its strength and its life. In both instances it is out of love for humanity.

This movement of “descent” is admirably described by Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians: “His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God. But he lowered himself (or: emptied himself), to assume the condition of a slave and became as men are”. In the light of my explanation you could interpret in this way the words of Paul: God became much less than a man, an object in fact, because a slave is in Roman law an object. So, if Paul says that God took the condition of a slave it is not a metaphor. In effect, the fact of dying on a cross expresses it clearly: the cross in the Roman world is the punishment appropriate for slaves, a free man cannot be crucified.

In the same way by offering himself to humanity in the Eucharist, by becoming bread for the life of the world, Christ becomes a “thing” in the hand of everybody he gives himself to everyone to be eaten. From now on everybody can be united to God in a very simple way by receiving the Body of Christ in Communion.

It is possible to continue in this way and review all the sacraments and the entire faith and Christian practice in order to see how everything derives from the love of God: from this Trinitarian love as it is in itself, from this love given to humanity which is manifest in the life of Christ and the sacraments.

V. CONCLUSION

1. A simple, coherent and profound concept of God

In reality, as you can see, the Christian concept of God and of life is much simpler than that of Islam, at the same time it is much more profound and richer. The Trinity, far from being an inexplicable mystery making Christianity abstruse, is on the contrary the mystery which explains everything and in particular, gives meaning to our life.

Islam, in effect, is not as simple as it is made out to be and certainly not as rational. The Muslim profession of faith (the *shahadah*) affirms a double dogma: the dogma of a unique God and that of the prophecy of Muhammad. Now if you can understand even rationally the first dogma, namely, there is no other god but God, you do not understand (the second dogma) namely, why Muhammad should be his prophet, it's only because the Muslims say so. And, nothing in Muhammad's life

and even more so nothing in the explanations which the Muslims make allows one to rationally affirm the second dogma or even suggest that Muhammad might be a prophet.

On the other hand, the Christian profession of faith (our *sahadah*) is single and simple. It could be summarised in these few words: "I witness that God is love". And you could stop there. All the rest (including our Creed) is only the explanation of this profession of faith from which everything else is derived: the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, the sacraments, notably the Eucharist, as we have seen, but also Baptism which integrates into the divine family into Christ and into the Church; the Sacrament of Penance, which re-integrates into the divine and Trinitarian communion; etc. If, and it is impossible, that some mystery of the Christian faith could not be linked to the love of God, to this love of the Triune God, then I would have reasons to doubt this point of faith.

So then, starting from the Trinity, that is to say from the God of Love, the Christian vision illuminates the whole Christian faith. In this sense, I can answer the challenge which the Muslims have thrown down when they assert that Christianity is complicated, irrational and incomprehensible. Another challenge will have to be accepted, to find out whether Christianity is realistic or unrealistic.....but we will deal with that in a second lecture.

Briefly, there is but one God, however our understandings and our representations of God are multiple and very different. This has been expressed in an admirable way by Abu Ra'itah Habib Ibn Hudayfah al-Takrit, who after having explained the unicity of God and having shown that this God is common to all believers, spoke to the Muslims (around the year 820) in this way "But what a distance there is between our concept of God and yours!"

This explains that at the same time we are brothers (and sisters) in faith in a God who is one (and here it has to be restated that the Muslims believe with conviction in this absolute unicity of God, indeed it is the very essence of Islam, the *tawhid*, and sometimes they express this conviction more clearly than the Christians), and also that we are quite far apart if we consider the understanding that each one has of this unique God.

2. The true dialogical attitude

There you have the paradox and the difficulty of dialogue: it affirms both of us. You meet these days two opposing tendencies in relation to Islam (and more generally to non-Christian religions) which consists in both cases of emphasising one aspect of reality.

The first insists on the fact that we all have a common faith in a unique God, that we are all sons of Abraham, that we are all in agreement on the essentials, and that the disagreements or differences concern the details only. It is a reaction of ignorance (at least we hope so, because if not it would be more serious: there would be a fixed desire to falsify reality) of perhaps ingenuousness, or naivete. It is evidence of kind feelings and a good heart. It is also evidence alas of a poorly developed mind.

The second tendency which is diametrically opposed, asserts that there is nothing in common between ourselves and the Muslims (or members of other religions). "Look at their concept of God", they say. Often they will compare the Christian ideal which is so noble with the Muslim practice which is hardly uplifting! This attitude is evidence of the same ignorance as the first tendency with the addition of fanaticism.

I am told from time to time that of two evils it's better to choose the lesser. Certainly on the personal level, this betokens an interior generosity which is absent from the other tendency; but it could also betoken psychological complexes which have not been resolved nor cured, or indeed a weakness of character, etc. Furthermore, at the level of community it is not certain that this tendency is always beneficial.

The third way, which I suggest, consists in holding on to these two affirmations simultaneously: we believe in the same God, but we understand this same God in ways which are profoundly different. From this derive profound divergences in the vision of human life, in the relationships between human beings, in the relationship between humanity and God, etc. That is what we are going to try and approach in our second lecture.

(KIERAN MAGOVERN, C.M., translator)